

HP114/SB129: SUPPORT
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HB114/SB129 SUPPORT
Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee AND
House Judiciary Committee

Dear Chairs Smith and Clippinger and Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee and House Judiciary Committee:

As an interfaith minister and more than 50-year resident of the State of Maryland in District 16, I strongly support SB129/HB114. This bill would require and coordinate the legal representation for Maryland residents facing deportation and detention in the Immigration Court regardless of where they might be detained. I urge you to consider its passage on moral and humanitarian grounds.

Our immigrant neighbors face crushing fears and threats. They FEAR separation from their families, most of whom were created while residing, working and paying taxes in our communities. They are vital assets to our State, and many are the so-called essential workers who have kept us safe, nourished, healthy and well-cared for during this pandemic crisis. They have been unduly THREATENED with deportation proceedings in recent times due to the harsh and cruel enforcement mandates of the prior federal administration, many of which continue to this day. They deserve access to counsel and due process under the law, regardless of income, background, or merit of case. Studies have shown that individuals without representation are 10.5 times less likely to obtain due process. Since the passage of Dignity Not Detention and its anticipated enactment this fall, ICE has already begun to detain our Maryland residents elsewhere making it harder for them to retain counsel. This bill would protect their rights and benefit family unity and justice.

I minister to immigrant neighbors and see the pain they have suffered for far too long. Let us open our hearts to these families. They are our neighbors, friends, family, and beloveds. Let all of us in this State assure that they are treated with compassion and understanding. Maryland can continue to lead the way with this bill. Other jurisdictions have adopted such supportive programs for their residents with great success. See <https://www.vera.org/the-human-impact-of-universal-representation> for a look at how we can continue to lead with love in our State.

I urge a favorable report on SB129/HB114.

With hope for peace and justice through love,
Rev. Charlene Belsom Zellmer, MDiv